



The following case study was produced as part of the research report “Success Themes in Supportive Employment”. Copies of the full report are available online: http://www.socialenterprisecanada.ca/en/learn/nav/SET_Report.html



Funding provided through the Canada-British Columbia Labour Market Development Agreement

VICTORIA WOMEN IN NEED COMMUNITY COOPERATIVE

Overview

The Victoria Women In Need Community Cooperative (“WIN”) is a nonprofit cooperative association whose mission is to create opportunities for women and their families to be self-sufficient, employed, inspired, socially and environmentally aware and connected to their communities. WIN runs three resale merchandise stores in Victoria that employ 34 people, mostly women. The stores simultaneously provide a revenue stream to support WIN’s social service programs for women and families in the transition process from crisis to financial self-sufficiency and wellness.

Background

The Victoria Women In Need Society was founded over two decades ago by a group woman, some of whom had experienced abuse themselves, who decided to create an organization that could support the efforts of other women to remake their lives. WIN was incorporated as a nonprofit and opened its first resale shop in 1991. In 2005, to meet the succession needs of its founders, the organization was restructured and incorporated as a cooperative.

In addition to providing quality merchandise in its three stores, WIN is also known for creating employment, as well as providing programs and support, for women. The revenue generated by WIN’s stores sustains its community programs and services, which include:

- *Crisis and Referral Program:* offers women practical support (clothing and household goods) and referrals to community resources for legal support, housing, employment services, counseling, shelter, crisis support and childcare in Victoria.
- *Self Sufficiency Program:* provides one-on-one support, training and funding for women to pursue further education, career enhancement or small business development opportunities. This program supports women in learning to become self-sufficient.
- *Transformations Program:* an in-depth personal development education program developed with The Haven on Gabriola Island.

- *New Start Program*: has provided over 2,000 women in the Greater Victoria Area with furniture and household items needed to set up their own home after leaving a transition house.
- *Gift Certificate Program*: enables women and their children who are residents or outreach clients of transition houses and second-stage houses to receive essential clothing, household, and children's items.
- *Community Gifts in Kind Program*: provides essential items to other organizations to support their program development.

Because some of the women who started WIN experienced being dependent on social welfare benefits, they wanted to create opportunities for women to nurture independence from government support. Thus, the organization does not accept any government funding, relying instead on sales revenue from the stores in addition to some monetary and in-kind donations.

Target Population for Employment

WIN hires employees for the retail, production (donations and sorting) and administration teams. The staff of 34 employees is 60% full-time (40 hours per week) and 40% part-time (ranging from 4–32 hours per week).

WIN does not classify its employees as “target” or “non-target.” Rather, they seek to hire the best person for the job, looking for people who are open to learning and gaining experience. Administration jobs tend to require higher levels of literacy, while cashiers need to know how to use point of sales machine. According to Executive Director Clare Yazganoglu, “WIN doesn’t try to set up barriers – if people can do the job, they are hired.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, over the last 23 years WIN’s employees and volunteers have been made up of a diverse group of primarily (90%) women. They come from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences, including newcomers to Canada, First Nations people, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, single mothers, or some combination of these. Many have found solutions to the barriers to employment that they may have faced, such as childcare issues or language barriers; this speaks to the employees’ own resourcefulness and commitment to self-sufficiency in their lives.

WIN requires its employees to have functional language skills in order to work in the retail division, and many volunteers come to WIN to expand their English language skills.

The Employee Journey

Recruitment

WIN collaborates with many other organizations in the community that support women's self-sufficiency through program referrals both to and from WIN. WIN also works with local organizations in supporting women to get work experience at WIN. This network supports their mission as well as their mandate to provide meaningful employment in the community.

The organization uses mainstream recruitment methods to advertise for openings, posting job descriptions on free online bulletin boards such as Craigslist. Eligible candidates must have an address where they can be reached, their own Social Insurance Number, transportation and childcare.

A high proportion of applicants are usually selected for interviews. Interviews consist of reviewing the applicant's resume, and asking exploratory questions to assess their skills and their interest in WIN, presenting the interviewer with an opportunity to explore potential beyond what is on paper.

Some interviewees are also asked to participate in "experiential tests" – for example, they may be asked to dress a display case or mannequin, or walk through a customer service scenario. This is a useful measure to determine basic retail knowledge and for people who are not used to formal job interviews.

Following the interview, all candidates are asked to perform a self-assessment, and send an email to the interviewer with their reflections on the recruitment and interview process, an innovative measure designed by WIN staff.

As stated above, WIN hires people who are suitable for the positions, regardless of their prior experience. The main factors that WIN's management team look for when hiring new employees are:

- A passion for the work the WIN does in the community,
- A willingness to participate and engage in the aspects of the work that they care about (e.g. a passion for the environment, WIN's programs, gently used goods, vintage or retro items); and
- A desire to learn and grow in the jobs.

Hiring / On-boarding

Successful applicants receive a welcome letter from the Executive Director. They participate in a formal orientation process covering the Employee Terms and Conditions, WIN policies (e.g., privacy and time tracking), Health & Safety and job-specific training. Training is primarily on-the-job.

Each employee is assigned to a manager who provides ongoing training. After their first month of employment, they meet formally with their manager to review training progress. After three months, employees receive a performance appraisal. Performance goals, training and career needs, wages and promotions are appraised regularly. Performance appraisals are based on self-assessment, training and development interests.

Wages & Benefits

Wages are established within a wage scale based on job evaluation, and range from just above minimum wage to a living wage. As one of its strategic goals, the cooperative is working toward providing a living wage for all employees.

Benefits include (but are not limited to) BC's Medical Services Plan, group benefits and retirement contributions. According to WIN's policy, all permanent employees who have been continuously employed by WIN for nine months and who work 15 hours or more per week must participate in WIN's group benefit plan. The employees are required to pay 50% of the premiums, with WIN incurring the other 50%. Employees may opt out of the health and dental portions where they are covered under another plan.

Recognition

Other staff members or managers may nominate WIN's employees for Staff Awards in a variety of areas, including Programs, Environment, Teamwork, Customer/Donor Service, and Innovation. WIN also recognizes employees in its newsletter.

Participatory management style

WIN's participatory management style and corporate philosophy support open discussions, an acceptance of different opinions, and an openness to adaptation and change. Employees are engaged in decision-making in a variety of ways, including co-op membership and committees (see employee engagement and community building sections below).

Tenure

For full-time employees, the median length of employment is five years (one employee has been there for 23 years). In contrast, part-time employees tend to stay an average of six months to one year. The most common reasons for departure include pursuing new job opportunities, returning to school or moving.

Other Employment Supports

WIN has management team members who provide employee supports; these individuals are trained in human resources, social work and program delivery. Employees can access employment-related supports on a continuous basis.

Financial Support

Employees are able to access pay advances if needed. WIN also assists employees in crisis by supplying clothing, household and children's items when needed, and offers store discounts to all employees.

Personal Development and Wellness

Employees are encouraged to seek support around personal development and self-sufficiency. When budgetary funds are available, WIN's employees have access to personal development and wellness training provided through partner organizations such as The Haven. Employees can also attend community courses provided by WIN. In the past, these have included compassionate communication, self-defense, money skills and career exploration.

Employees come to WIN with a vast array of background skills and interests. Some have been able to integrate those into the workplace, leading to innovative changes in the organization's process and policies at the operations, program and environmental levels. For example, a Production Manager who was a former yoga teacher introduced twice-daily stretch breaks for all production staff as a way to prevent musculoskeletal injuries.

Employee Engagement

WIN holds all-staff meetings, using these as an opportunity to provide training, seek feedback and discuss issues related to WIN, employment, programs, and so on. Employees can also make suggestions through an anonymous feedback box.

After nine months, WIN employees and volunteers may become co-op members. The members directly participate in shaping the future of the organization. They are able to learn governance skills, how to understand financial statements, and other skills such as conflict resolution. The Cooperative currently has 17 members.

Community Building

Both co-op members and non co-op members are able to participate in a number of different committees:

- Program committee
- Environment committee (responsible for recycling program and other initiatives)
- Wellness at Work committee (brings in guest speakers to talk about health and safety issues)
- Marketing and PR committee

Committees meet once per month during work time. Minutes are posted and made available to all staff and volunteers.

Every two weeks, WIN sends out a newsletter to staff, which includes their own contributions. The newsletter recognizes staff, celebrates accomplishments, birthdays and anniversaries, and provides news about what is going on across the organization.

Participation in the activities described above contributes to the employees' sense that they are making a difference by working at WIN.

Community Supports

WIN partners with retailers, women's organizations and other community organizations to promote their work and encourage a steady supply of high-quality donations (clothing, accessories, household items, linens, furniture, books, collectibles, jewelry, etc.), primarily from local residents. The first priority for the donations is to ensure that WIN is able to meet the needs of the women in WIN's programs.

WIN has developed strong community partnerships around their environmental practices, health and safety, training and development, and financial services (through their credit union). These partnerships support the enterprise, which in turn supports WIN's capacity to provide meaningful employment.

WIN has a formal agreement with an Employee Assistance Program to provide employee benefits. WIN has worked with various organizations such as Royal Roads University and The Haven to provide job-related and personal development training.

WIN also receives community support through donations and fundraising events like Fashion with Passion. Because WIN is a non-profit social enterprise and not a charity, they do not issue charitable tax receipts. WIN also receives general community support through in-kind donations, word of mouth and social media support.

Challenges

By and large, part-time retail jobs tend to have high turnover, and WIN's experience is no exception. While their turnover rate is fairly low among approximately two-thirds of its positions (with an average of 3.5 years of employment), in the remaining third, particularly at the entry level, there is a relatively high turnover rate, split equally between part time and full time roles. This turnover leads to higher recruiting and training costs.

The other challenge WIN faces, like so many nonprofits, is financial sustainability. Because they do not receive government funding, they rely on the generosity of

the community and their own strong retail skills and principles to provide the revenue needed to sustain the programs and the organization itself.

Cost of Employment Support

WIN operates at a slight surplus, which it reinvests back into its programs and operations.

WIN has never relied on government or any other funding body to cover the costs of operation or employment support. From the beginning, it has been a priority for the Board of WIN to remain a self-sustaining organization.

Outside of standard employment costs (wages, benefits and training), support costs include staff support of employee engagement activities (e.g., committees and newsletter), and the cost of goods donated to support staff in crisis.

WIN receives a property tax exemption from the City of Victoria for the building that they own, reducing their expenses and allowing them to better accomplish their mission.

Employment Outcomes

WIN does not formally measure employment outcomes and success. The enterprise considers itself successful when, through empirical observation and newsletter surveys, they see individuals who are gainfully employed, financially self-sufficient, have the supports they need to be independent, and are excited about their future.

Even without formal measurements, the correlation between WIN's employment mandate and outcomes is evident: through its three stores, WIN is creating opportunities for women and their families to be self-sufficient, employed, inspired, socially and environmentally aware and connected to their communities.

WIN's employees leave their jobs with new skills, and move on to other employment or educational opportunities. While employed, they benefit from:

- Being part of an "amazing organization" and feeling like they're making a difference by working there
- Working in a place where people want to work
- Being offered support in the form of training opportunities and personal development whenever possible
- Learning job-related skills (e.g., retailing, customer service and display techniques, production systems, processing systems, public relations)
- Learning other workplace skills (e.g., health and safety practices, communication)

- Learning skills related to cooperative membership and governance
- Participating in environmental initiatives, including WIN's membership in Climate Smart, a carbon footprint reduction program.
- Sharing ideas with a diverse group of people from a variety of backgrounds.

"Our employees are really committed and engaged in WIN," says Executive Director Yazganoglu. They care about their jobs and their impact in the community through their jobs."

Key Takeaways

WIN views its structure as a nonprofit social enterprise and community service cooperative as a key element in its success. "We are not stuck. Being open, flexible, curious and adaptable have all been essential to our success, and the co-op model allows us to run with ideas," notes Yazganoglu.

Rather than focus on people's barriers, WIN employs people who they feel are the best for the job and demonstrate the most potential; once employees are working, WIN provides ongoing supports. Their strategy, in other words, is to "spot potential and invest in it," says Yazganoglu. Employees are treated equally, reducing the stigma of any barriers they may face in their life situation.

WIN's innovative practices include:

- Conducting experiential interviews, giving applicants a chance to try out the job before starting;
- Asking interviewees to submit their self-reflection and assessment, showing an inclusive orientation from the start of the employment process;
- Training on subjects that go beyond job roles and responsibilities, e.g., co-op member governance, conflict resolution, wellness, personal development
- Providing extensive opportunities for employee engagement and community building.
- Providing access to WIN's other services for women in need.

WIN's social enterprise model uses business to improve the life of its employees – and its community - in a clear and effective way.